



## Chapter 4

# The Great Initiation

Most mornings, after the flight was finished everyone would head back for the launch site. The vehicles and trailers would come crawling out of the desert stuffed with balloon gear and people. Sometimes a vehicle was so loaded down it could barely make it back over the rough roads and occasionally people had to walk around the really bad spots.

There is no typical balloon chase vehicle. Most people had pickup trucks. These varied from fancy four-wheel drive rigs to beatup trucks that had seen more cow manure in the back than balloons. Several crews had trailers that were pulled behind anything from the family sedan to custom vans. One enterprising fellow had converted an old milk truck so the gondola and envelope could be stored inside. The oddest rig was an old London taxi towing a trailer made from an even older pickup bed!

There were many good reasons for gathering back at the launch site. We would share tales of the day's flight and have refreshments. Occasionally we'd have a potluck picnic and play some games. It gave everyone a chance to meet the other balloonists and chase crews and to make friends.

We also made sure everyone who had launched that morning was accounted for. The New Mexico desert was rough on vehicles and crews. If a vehicle became stuck or broken down it usually took several other people and sometimes a couple of four wheel drive vehicles to get them out. Every once in a while we would even have to go out and hunt for a lost balloon.

Several vehicles would spread out over the area where the balloon was last seen and search until it was found. Occasionally we would have to carry the envelope out of a gully like a long Chinese Dragon. The availability of extra people from the launch site often meant saving many hours of hard work.

We also gathered back at the launch site for the traditional initiation of first timers, solo pilots, and people passing the private or commercial pilot's flight test. Now, before you read on and decide you never want to ride in a hot air balloon, I should tell you customs vary greatly with crews and with areas of the country. The initiation of the solo pilots, regular crew members, or close friends also differs considerably from that given to the commercial customers who just come out for a ride and pay for the privilege.

Champagne is part of this tradition and its use is as old as hot air ballooning. The early day hot air balloonists in France were supposed to have carried champagne with them in the gondola so when they landed they could offer some to the often scared, pitchfork-carrying farmers who ran out to see what creature had come out of the sky.

No matter how it is done, the initiations are always fun to watch and can occasionally get a little wild. George was unpredictable. I think he liked to keep us guessing and I'm sure he was also a good judge of character and knew just how far to go with a particular person. In my case, I suspected I would receive no mercy. As we pulled up the hill to the launch site I looked at my companions in the pickup. Judy and the kids grinned at me.

"You still have a canary-eating grin on your face," Judy laughed.

"Well, what did you expect?" I said. "It was a good flight and I had a ball."

"That's OK," Phil leered. "There's a lot more fun coming."

He knew I was going to get it. Today had been my first ride. I was the last one in the family to get a balloon ride. I had roared as each of them had been initiated and now it was their turn to laugh. I didn't think George would disappoint them. We had a crew of nine people. Two young lady friends of George had also taken their first ride that day. They had been out with us once before, but we had flown a rally and there

had been no rides. I suspected the combination of two pretty girls and a chase crew regular who had needled everyone else would make for a particularly interesting ceremony.

We pulled onto the launch site and George stopped the pickup about the middle of the field. Several people gathered around, asking about the flight.

"It was a beautiful day," George said. He spotted a girl pilot from a balloon named Teddy Bear and gave her a hug. "I almost caught up with you at fence line."

"I was waiting to give you a kiss," she said.

This usually refers to two balloons touching together in flight, but the way she looked at him, there was a double meaning in the words. George made the rounds, visiting with some of the other crews. I grabbed a cold drink and waited. I knew I didn't dare leave. Every once in a while he would look over at me and grin. It was obvious he was enjoying the agony of suspense. He also made certain each of the two new girls were introduced to several people in the crowd. When he was sure he had an audience, he gathered the crew up and scratched a line in the dirt in front of the pickup on the side facing the sun.

"Please kneel on that line facing me," he said. "We have a special treat for you as first timers. We need some people to help out as sponsors for these fine folks. Where are Kevin and Laurlie? I'm sure they wouldn't want to miss this."

The rest of the crew lined up behind us to act as our sponsors. George took the first champagne bottle and unwired the cap. Philip and Kevin took off their caps and stood waiting. When the champagne cork popped off and arched into the sky, the two boys and several other people scrambled for the catch. Phil made a diving grab with his hat, rolled on the ground, and came up with the cork in hand.

"Nice catch," George grinned. "That means you get a ride next time."

Three glasses of champagne were poured and one set before each of us.

"Hats off, everybody," George said. "This is a very solemn occasion. We have three people here who have just taken their first ride in a hot air balloon."

He turned back to us, with a look of an oldtime preacher about to bless the flock. Everyone stood quietly, for this was a moment that touched all of us no matter how many times we had heard it.

"We have a little prayer we recite for every first timer," George said. "We don't know the origin for sure, but it is often called 'The Irish Balloonist Prayer.' It goes like this."

The winds have welcomed you with softness,  
The sun has blessed you with its warm hands,  
You have flown so high and so well that God has  
    joined you in laughter,  
And then set you gently back into the loving arms  
    of Mother Earth."

There was a short moment of silence to let the meaning of the words sink in. Then George said, "Now you must pick up the glass of champagne with your teeth and drink. You can't touch the glass with your hands and you must drain the glass."

I knew what was coming, but the two girls thought it was just another part of a very pretty, delicate ceremony. Unknown to them, each of the sponsors standing behind us had a can of beer and as we bent over to pick up the glasses of champagne they emptied their cans on our heads. The fact that I knew what was coming didn't help. The beer hit the top of my head like an ice-cold shower and then ran like icicles down my back. The girl next to me squealed and started to straighten up, but then she bent back over to pick up the glass with a look of determination on her face. We tilted our heads back and drained the glasses. Some of the beer ran down my face, and part of the champagne dribbled out around the edges of the glass and ran down my chin.

I glanced around and three people were standing behind me with empty beer cans. The two girls were better off. Each had only had about a half a can poured on her. The laughter of the crowd subsided and then they applauded us for completing the test, but nobody moved away.

We stood up and George stepped up to the first lady. He had a small metal pin in his hand. It was shaped like a hot air balloon against a cloud background. The colored metal and

baked enamel surface were an exact copy of Snap Dragon, and the name of the balloon was etched on the cloud.

"We have a memento of your first flight for you to wear and keep," he said. "It is the honor of the pilot to pin this on you."

He pinned the pin to her collar and then gave her a kiss and a hug. "Welcome to the world of ballooning," he said. She grinned and shook her head so the champagne on her hair sprayed his face. He ducked away and wiped the moisture away on a sleeve.

"Serves me right I guess," he laughed.

Someone handed her a towel and then several people stepped up to give her a hug. The tears in her eyes said more than words could have expressed.

George pinned the other girl and then turned to Judy. "As much as Cal laughed when you got yours, I think you deserve this honor," he said.

Judy stepped up and pinned me and then it was my turn to get hugs and kisses from the other ladies. It was almost worth the soaking I had received.

Judy handed me a dry shirt. "You had better change into this," she said. "We might have a tough time explaining this to the cops."

"Maybe you'd better drive home," I said. "I'd have a tough time keeping the wheels on the ground."

"Still somewhere up in that blue sky?" she asked.

I nodded and looked out over the desert. "Someday, maybe someday, we'll be able to have our own balloon," I thought.